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P-265.2

Honorable Art Agnos, Chairman
Members, Joint Legislative
Audit Committee
State Capitol, Room 3151
Sacramento, California 95814

Dear Mr. Chairman and Members:

This letter provides follow-up information on the Department of Social Services' (department) administration of child abuse prevention programs. Specifically, we reviewed the department's compliance with the Budget Act of 1984 (Chapter 258, Statutes of 1984), which required the department to implement by February 1, 1985, a method for assessing the effectiveness of child abuse prevention programs that receive AB 1733 funds. This legislation required the department to determine the types and extent of services offered, the cost of providing these services, and the impact these programs have on the clients and communities they serve.

The department's Office of Child Abuse Prevention (OCAP) has implemented a system for evaluating the activities of child abuse prevention programs and plans to issue a preliminary report to the Legislature in January 1986. While the department's report will provide descriptive data about these programs, it will not fully address questions concerning the impact these programs have on their clients or on the communities they serve. Several years must elapse before a valid assessment of the impact of these child abuse prevention programs can be made, and the cost of such an assessment could be prohibitive. We have discussed the contents of this letter with officials from the department.

Background

Child abuse is defined as any act that endangers or impairs a child's physical or emotional health and development. Under this definition, child abuse includes physical abuse and corporal punishment, emotional abuse, physical neglect, inadequate supervision, and sexual abuse. The American Association for Protecting Children estimated that approximately 1,500,000 children were reported to have been abused or

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neglected in the United States in 1983. During 1984, California counties served an average per quarter of 60,000 children who were reported as abused or neglected.

During 1974, the Legislature amended Section 18952 of the Welfare and Institutions Code, establishing the Office of Child Abuse Prevention (OCAP) within the Department of Health Services. In 1977, the Legislature amended Section 18952, transferring the OCAP to the Department of Social Services. The OCAP, under the department's Adult and Family Services Division, is responsible for developing innovative services for preventing child abuse. To fulfill this responsibility, the OCAP funds and monitors both pilot and demonstration projects for the prevention of child abuse.* The OCAP also provides technical assistance to communities needing help in dealing with problems involving child abuse and neglect. Additionally, the OCAP serves as the center for coordinating activities to prevent child abuse and neglect throughout the State.

AB 1733, which became effective on October 1, 1982, appropriated \$10 million from the State's General Fund for the OCAP and its programs for the prevention of child abuse and neglect. The legislation also set a limit of 5 percent of these funds for administrative costs and authorized 3 percent of these funds for training and technical assistance. Further, this legislation established procedures, criteria, and priorities for selecting the programs to be funded. During fiscal year 1985-86, the department will receive an appropriation of approximately \$10.4 million from the State's General Fund for AB 1733 programs.

Scope and Methodology

The Budget Act of 1984 required the department to implement a performance evaluation method by February 1, 1985, to measure the effectiveness of child abuse prevention programs that receive AB 1733 funds. To assess the department's efforts to comply with this requirement, we interviewed the managers of the OCAP and reviewed draft versions of the OCAP's first AB 1733 evaluation report, which is scheduled to be issued in January 1986. In addition, we selected a

*A pilot project receives its original funding from one source in anticipation that the project's results will attract continued funding from other sources. A demonstration project attempts to develop a model that, if successful, can be replicated by other projects.

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sample of the statistical information contained in the OCAP's draft report and verified the accuracy with which the OCAP transcribed this information by cross-checking it against the original data that the AB 1733 projects submitted to the OCAP. Finally, we consulted experts on child abuse research to learn about the problems involved in measuring the effectiveness of these programs and the costs of such efforts.

Efforts to Measure Effectiveness
of Child Abuse Prevention Programs

By February 1985, the OCAP implemented a system for evaluating child abuse prevention programs and complied with most of the Legislature's requirements. However, the OCAP's performance evaluation system does not fully address questions concerning the impact that child abuse prevention programs have on their clients or on the communities the programs serve.

The OCAP has developed a performance evaluation system that includes data on the types and frequency of services that programs offer, the characteristics of clients who receive these services, opinions that clients form about the services they receive, and the cost of these services. We reviewed a sample of this data as it is presented in the OCAP's draft report and found that the OCAP's transcription and summary of the data that AB 1733 programs submitted did not contain any significant errors. The OCAP also collected data on occurrences or reoccurrences of abuse or neglect among clients; however, the OCAP acknowledges that program staff would have to be living with clients to say with certainty that abuse or neglect had not occurred.

The OCAP program manager has stated that several years must elapse before a valid assessment of the impact of child abuse prevention programs can be made and that the cost of such an assessment could be prohibitive. Experts in child abuse research at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, and the University of California, Berkeley, concur with the OCAP. One child abuse expert at the University of California, Los Angeles, has stated that the cost of some attempts to collect data on the incidence or prevalence of child abuse may be equal to or even higher than the cost of intervention itself.

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Conclusion

The Department of Social Services has complied with most of the Legislature's requirement for implementing a system for evaluating child abuse prevention programs. The department plans to issue a preliminary report to the Legislature in January 1986. While the report will provide descriptive data about these programs, the impact of these programs cannot be assessed at this time, and it could be very costly to make such an assessment in the future.

Sincerely,


THOMAS W. HAYES
Auditor General